

A RACE WITH DEATH

BY DEREK VANE,

(Author of "The Three Daughters of Night," "The Mystery of the Moat House," etc.).

WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

I have been for some years attached to the Secret Service Department, and my chief honors me with his confidence to a marked degree. I may say that I have done my utmost to deserve it, and fortune has favored me on several occasions.

In private life I am known as Mrs. Dumarec, the widow of an officer in the army, and I live very quietly in a pretty villa at Chislehurst. In what I may call my official capacity, neither my name nor any other personal details matter; I become a human machine, devoting all my powers of mind and body to the service of the Government. One life is entirely separate from the other. That I am young, of good appearance, and speak two or three languages perfectly, I have found very useful factors in my difficult and dangerous, but fascinating, career.

I had been resting for two or three weeks when I received a summons to town. "I have sent for you," Sir Edward began, "because I am a little uneasy, not to give you any definite instructions. I have received warnings from Paris and Berlin that trouble is brewing, and I cannot localize it in any way. It is unsatisfactory to try and fight an unknown danger; not to speak of the risk. I am ignorant from which quarter it will come, or what form it will take."

"And the person who is working the trouble," I said, "is he unknown to you, too?"

"No, it is the notorious anarchist, Terah Schlich."

"Oh," I said, a little blankly, for I knew that this man was as wily as a serpent, with the advantage of possessing an innocent and prepossessing exterior. There was no sign without of the daredevil spirit within, which knew neither fear nor pity. A man of such soft, persuasive speech and manner as to deceive even his enemies. Time after time he had slipped through the coils just as they were tightening round him.

"Yes," Sir Edward said, with a slight smile, answering my unspoken thoughts, "not an adversary to be despised, I admit. By the by, have you ever seen him?"

"No," I replied, "though he is familiar enough to me by report."

He unlocked one of the numerous drawers in his writing table and took out a photograph.

"That is the man," he said, handing me the card.

"He looks very German," I remarked after a moment's consideration, noting the fair hair and light, sparkling eyes, the smiling, rather sleepy looking face, and the broad, athletic shoulders.

"He is German, on one side, at least; his mother, I believe, was English. He speaks both languages like a native and, although he has had the upbringing of a gentleman, which makes him the more dangerous."

"Where is he now?" I asked. Do you know?"

"The last information I had was that he was living out Shirley way. But with such a man his ostensible place of abode means nothing; the danger is most likely to come from the very opposite quarter."

"He is not far from me then," I said musingly. "I think I had better return home, and start operations from there. I am less likely to be suspected. I suppose you wish me to watch Mr. Schlich and find out what he is plotting?"

"Exactly," he said. "He will not be so much on his guard with a lady. You may succeed where a man would certainly fail. I am so completely in the dark that I can give you no help, I am afraid. I can only say—suspect everything and risk nothing. The newspapers, especially the Radical ones, are a source of inconvenience to us, but I will see you through any little difficulty that may arise."

I was in the habit of riding on horseback a good deal, and that same evening I had my mare, Black Bess, brought round, and started off on an exploring expedition.

It was an ideal night for a ride; it would be light till 9 o'clock. A little rain had fallen earlier in the day, just sufficient to lay the dust, and to freshen up the hedges. The pungent smell of the woods was wafted to me now and again, and in the distance Shirley Common lay glowing like a purple cloud, for the heather was in bloom. My mare danced under me, feeling the intoxication of the summer night as I did. She was more sympathetic than many human beings. We had been so much together that she seemed to understand my moods and identified herself with them. I had called her Black Bess because, with her beauty and fleetness, she was worthy to be the namesake of Dick Turpin's famous mare.

I was bent on discovering Mr. Schlich's place of abode, so I halted presently at a little country inn, where I was on friendly terms with the landlady. I asked for a glass of lemonade, which she brought me out herself, and we chatted together a little while. I was just about to put a cautious question when she forestalled me.

"Did you hear of the accident to-day, ma'am?" she asked with an air of importance. "Happening so close to us, I can't get it out of my mind. Why, if I had been standing where I am now, I might have seen it."

"No," I said, "I have heard nothing. What was it?"

"The gentleman who has just taken the Grey House over there—he's got a queer name: Mr. Terah Schlich—was out riding this morning, as you might be now, when he was thrown from his horse and broke his leg. They telegraphed to a London doctor to come down, and he set it, and I hear the poor gentleman's going on all right. But it'll be hard lines for him, so fond as he is of riding out and about. Such a pleasant gentleman, too, with a friendly word for everybody."

I had started at the name, and Black Bess shook herself playfully, so that the landlady beat a hasty retreat, and my surprise passed unnoticed.

"What an unfortunate thing," I said. "Is the gentleman living here alone?"

"Yes," she said, he had not been having very good health, and had come down for a rest and change. I'm afraid this will throw him back again."

When I said good night to the landlady I walked my horse in the direction of the Grey House. I knew it by sight, for I had noticed it when out riding. It was a gloomy, neglected looking place, surrounded by extensive grounds, which had been allowed to run wild. The house had stood empty for some time I knew, and evidently Schlich had not troubled to have much done to it. On the side facing the road the trees were so thick and high that but little else could be seen. I went past at the slowest pace that was prudent, scanning it as closely as I dared. With such a wily adversary one could not be too cautious. The Grey House had not a neighbor for half a mile, and there was very little traffic along

the road. Certainly, if seclusion were desired, he had come to the right place.

And what was I to think of the accident? That was a feature in the case for which I was not prepared, and it puzzled me. Was it genuine or was it not? There seemed no ground for supposing that it had been arranged for my benefit, to baffle me or put me off the scent. It had occurred before I had made a movement, and, besides, I had no reason to believe that Mr. Schlich was even aware of my existence. I had never been mixed up with him before.

Supposing I accepted the accident as genuine, then what aspect did the affair assume? Schlich, confined to his bed with a broken limb, could certainly not take an active part in any mischief that was brewing. But I remembered what the chief had said, that it was probably from the least likely quarter that trouble would come. Though the arch-plotter might be shut up in one room, his brain could go over the world. He could form his plans and give his orders almost as well in his present condition as though nothing were the matter. He had, no doubt, more than one trustworthy agent, or with a secret code and the penny post he could dispense with even the risk of a go-between. His accident might, indeed, be of assistance to him, as affording him an excuse for shutting himself up if he wished to do so.

I reached home, restless and uneasy, undecided what to do.

A day or two passed, but brought me no light. I went for long, lonely rides, as was my habit, contriving to pass the Grey House either going or returning, but I could see and hear nothing. It was as silent as a house of the dead. I pictured the ruthless master weaving his web in the silence and darkness, like a human spider, hungry for lives, and I raged inwardly, because not one single thread found its way to my hands. I made cautious inquiries of my friend, the landlady, and at the village post office, but all I learned was that Mr. Schlich was progressing favorably and that he had very few letters. If Sir Edward had not been so sure that he was plotting mischief, I might have thought that he was here really only for rest and change of air, his existence appeared so harmless. There was no disguise about him, not even in his name. If it were not the frankness of innocence, it must be the audacity of guilt.

I had gone for a long ride one evening, and it was getting dark when I found myself again on the road to the Grey House. I was approaching The Elms, the nearest residence to Mr. Schlich's, which also stood in well-wooded grounds, and was occupied by a retired baronet of some reputation and his only son. A piece of ragged common land ran by the side of the road here for more than a mile, and I was riding quietly along on the grass, for both Black Bess and I were tired, when I noticed a cart drawn up on the other side of the road. The horse had on a nose bag, and the tail of the cart was turned toward a little door in the garden wall of The Elms.

I was a little curious as to what the cart could contain that it should be unloaded so late at a side door, and half unconsciously, I stopped a moment to look. As I paused two men came out and I heard one of them say:

"How many more have we got?" and there was a sound like the striking of a match.

His companion uttered a sharp exclamation, and stopped him with a gesture of alarm.

"Are you mad?" he said. "Do you want to blow us all to blazes?"

There was a muttered reply, and the man began rolling something towards him down the cart. It was too dark for me to see distinctly, but I could distinguish the shape of a barrel. He lifted it onto his shoulders and carried it through the garden gate, his companion following with a similar load.

When the sound of their footsteps had died away, I very cautiously, went up to the cart and looked inside. A tarpaulin was thrown back, and underneath it I saw two or three iron barrels. Looking closer, I noticed some writing on one of the white paint. It was one word: Gunpowder. Instinctively, I rode quietly away before the men could return. Gunpowder! The word haunted me, though, remembering that the occupant of The Elms was engaged in scientific pursuits, I told myself there was nothing extraordinary in his having such explosives in his possession. But in such a large quantity! He must surely be engaged on an experiment of considerable importance to need so much. And then the thought struck me that he was Terah Schlich's nearest neighbor. Could there be any connection between the two? I was in such a suspicious frame of mind that I was ready to imagine anything.

I was too restless and excited to sleep, and waiting until the moon had risen, so as I should have light enough for my purpose, I put on a dark cloak, drawing the hood over my head, and slipping a revolver into my pocket, I left the house. Fortunately, I was a good walker, for I had some distance to go, and I could not run the risk of taking Black Bess on this expedition. I intended making an inspection of the grounds surrounding Mr. Schlich's house and even—if an opportunity offered—of entering the house itself. Though I might discover nothing, I should feel more satisfied when this was done.

I chose a corner of the grounds farthest removed from the house, mounted the fence with some difficulty, and dropped lightly down on the other side. It was not likely any one would be about so late, but I took every precaution, hiding among the trees at the slightest sound. My heart was beating a little uncomfortably; everything seemed so still and mysterious. I was in a plantation of fir trees, their long, straight branches waving like arms around me, now quivering in the moonlight, now rustling in the dark. The patches of white light on the ground, where the moon pierced the trees, had a strange, uncanny look.

Suddenly I stepped out into a small, clear space in the middle of which stood a curious little building. What it was intended for I could not imagine. I went nearer, inspecting it on every side, trying to find an entrance, but without avail. It hugged its secret close—if secret there were. All I could be sure of was that it was not an old erection, but of quite recent date. It was this which roused my suspicions. If it had been built by Schlich, it must be for some sinister purpose. What could it be? I was so full of this discovery that I did not pursue my investigations any further that night.

The next day I rode out again to The Elms. As I went slowly past, a little party of gentlemen came down the drive and out of the gates. An elderly gentleman—evidently the owner—chatted with them as they got into a dog cart that was waiting, but I could only catch his last words.

"Until to-morrow, then."

And with a wave of the hand he went towards the house, while the dog cart was turned in the direction I was going. On the impulse of the moment I determined to follow it. After a drive of some miles along a country road it turned off at Eastnor and made for the barracks on the top of the hill. I was not very much surprised. There was a smart, military look about the men; evidently they were officers from the regiment stationed there. They knew the owner of The Elms and had driven over to see him. There was nothing strange in that. I saw a private soldier salute them, and I stopped and asked him casually who they were.

"Colonel Fordyce, Major Clair and General von Scheven," he replied.

The German General's name set me thinking. I recognized it as that of a well-known officer, an enthusiast in his profession, always on the lookout for any new discovery in military science, a favorite of the Kaiser's. What was he doing at The Elms? Had his owner made some important invention that was attracting the attention of the service? That might explain his possession of the gunpowder. Musing over this and that, vaguely uneasy without knowing why, I rode back the way I had come.

That night I made my way again into Mr. Schlich's demesne, and seeing a light in one of the lower windows, I concealed myself in a clump of laurels close by, hoping to hear or see something that might give me a guide. The light came from an open French window, and I could hear the murmur of voices, though I could not distinguish a word.

Presently some one stepped outside and was immediately joined by another man, Mr. Terah Schlich. It was fortunate that a slight breeze was blowing, or the movement I made might have betrayed me, for I started irresistibly when I saw that Schlich was walking quite easily, without even a limp. The broken leg had been a feint, then!

They were standing in the moonlight, and I could see them both distinctly. The stranger was none other than the owner of The Elms; the man I had seen taking farewell of the officers that same morning. What could he want here? In the fleeting glimpses I had of him earlier in the day, something in his face had struck me as faintly familiar. I recognized now what it was. There was a likeness between him and Terah Schlich. He was, apparently, a much older man, and instead of a beard he wore a heavy white mustache, but it was the same pleasant German type of face, and when he put his place near to his eyes, as he did once, the likeness was increased.

"Everything is running smoothly, then?" he said.

"Yes," Schlich replied. "The broken leg was a good dodge, it gave me all the privacy I wanted, and it puzzled my fair opponent. I do not think we have anything to fear from her."

"And you understand exactly what you

have to do? There will be no difficulty about your escape; you have only to be yourself and no one will recognize you. As for me, I shall be safe enough in the balloon."

"It's all right. There isn't a hitch anywhere. How many visitors do you expect?"

"About half a dozen. A Serene Highness, two or three other bigwigs, besides von Scheven. I shall be particularly pleased to see him. There is an old score against him I have long wanted to settle."

The pleasant, rather handsome old face underwent a curious change as he spoke. It became cold and hard as a mask; the thin lips parted over the white teeth in a wolfish snarl and the eyes glittered with a cruel hate.

"To-morrow morning, then," he said, as he shook hands with Schlich. "I shall not see you again until we meet in Paris."

Long after the house was in darkness I crouched there in fear and horror and amazement. I was overwhelmed by what had passed. It was so sudden and mysterious that, for a time, it robbed me of my self-possession. My thoughts drifted to and fro without finding anything on which they might rest.

Who was this man—the master of The Elms? I knew nothing of him. I had been set to watch Terah Schlich, but it was this other who seemed to take the lead. My face flushed hotly when I thought how I had been fooled. I was ready to risk my life to turn the tables. Schlich seemed to be merely a tool—an accomplice. And what was the scheme? Not a word had betrayed it. Any step I took would be fraught with danger, because it must be taken in the dark. And yet I could not remain quiescent. I lay awake thinking half the night, and directly after breakfast I mounted Black Bess and set off for Eastnor Camp. I would see Colonel Fordyce or Major Clair and put them on their guard. Perhaps they could help me to unravel the mystery. I inquired at the officers' quarters and learned that Colonel Fordyce was not in, but Major Clair would see me. I had written "Private and Important" on my card, and the young officer's face expressed some of the surprise he no doubt felt.

In a few words as possible I told him my errand.

"I don't know what the plot is," I concluded, "but as Terah Schlich is concerned in it, I am sure it is not to be despised. His face had grown very grave as I spoke."

"Colonel Fordyce and a few others have already started for The Elms," he said. "It was the merest chance I did not go with them. Professor Bordinman asked us to come and see a very interesting experiment in wireless telegraphy with a balloon he was to make this morning. He will fire a powder magazine electrically from a distant point without contact. In case of war it would, of course, be of great advantage to be able to explode mines and similar contrivances through aetheric communication only."

"I have read something of this discovery," I interrupted, "but we have no time for ex-

planations now. Something must be done at once or it will be too late. Can you make no suggestion? From which point is the danger likely to come? Of course, your friends must be warned, but I am anxious that Schlich should not escape."

Before I had finished speaking he had started up.

"If there is treachery," he said, "it must be in connection with the explosion; the professor is to be alone in the balloon. But I do not know where the electric station is with which he will be in communication. He did not show it to us; he merely mentioned that it was in the charge of a friend."

"Then I know," I cried excitedly. "It is at the Grey House in charge of Terah Schlich. In what way it is to be managed I cannot say, but I am convinced now that the people he has called together are to be killed in the explosion."

I saw that my words carried conviction, for Major Clair grew white as death.

"If that is what you think, and you know where the electric station is, for God's sake, go at once and shoot this Schlich down like a dog," he cried. "He has only

"Half blind and choked with dust, I urged my brave little mare to ever greater speed."

"To-morrow morning, then," he said, as he shook hands with Schlich. "I shall not see you again until we meet in Paris."

Long after the house was in darkness I crouched there in fear and horror and amazement. I was overwhelmed by what had passed. It was so sudden and mysterious that, for a time, it robbed me of my self-possession. My thoughts drifted to and fro without finding anything on which they might rest.

Who was this man—the master of The Elms? I knew nothing of him. I had been set to watch Terah Schlich, but it was this other who seemed to take the lead. My face flushed hotly when I thought how I had been fooled. I was ready to risk my life to turn the tables. Schlich seemed to be merely a tool—an accomplice. And what was the scheme? Not a word had betrayed it. Any step I took would be fraught with danger, because it must be taken in the dark. And yet I could not remain quiescent. I lay awake thinking half the night, and directly after breakfast I mounted Black Bess and set off for Eastnor Camp. I would see Colonel Fordyce or Major Clair and put them on their guard. Perhaps they could help me to unravel the mystery. I inquired at the officers' quarters and learned that Colonel Fordyce was not in, but Major Clair would see me. I had written "Private and Important" on my card, and the young officer's face expressed some of the surprise he no doubt felt.

In a few words as possible I told him my errand.

"I don't know what the plot is," I concluded, "but as Terah Schlich is concerned in it, I am sure it is not to be despised. His face had grown very grave as I spoke."

"Colonel Fordyce and a few others have already started for The Elms," he said. "It was the merest chance I did not go with them. Professor Bordinman asked us to come and see a very interesting experiment in wireless telegraphy with a balloon he was to make this morning. He will fire a powder magazine electrically from a distant point without contact. In case of war it would, of course, be of great advantage to be able to explode mines and similar contrivances through aetheric communication only."

"I have read something of this discovery," I interrupted, "but we have no time for ex-

planations now. Something must be done at once or it will be too late. Can you make no suggestion? From which point is the danger likely to come? Of course, your friends must be warned, but I am anxious that Schlich should not escape."

Before I had finished speaking he had started up.

"If there is treachery," he said, "it must be in connection with the explosion; the professor is to be alone in the balloon. But I do not know where the electric station is with which he will be in communication. He did not show it to us; he merely mentioned that it was in the charge of a friend."

"Then I know," I cried excitedly. "It is at the Grey House in charge of Terah Schlich. In what way it is to be managed I cannot say, but I am convinced now that the people he has called together are to be killed in the explosion."

I saw that my words carried conviction, for Major Clair grew white as death.

"If that is what you think, and you know where the electric station is, for God's sake, go at once and shoot this Schlich down like a dog," he cried. "He has only

to touch a button attached to the instrument and the magazine will be blown into atoms! Go! there is no time to explain matters to any one else. I will follow you as soon as I can, but I must go to The Elms first."

I did not wait for another word. I had flung myself on Black Bess and we were galloping down the road before I had recovered from my consternation.

Shall I ever forget that ride? No one who has not raced with death for the lives of men will understand what I felt. Should I be in time? I looked up at the brilliant sky, where the pitiless sun beat down on my head till I reeled in my saddle and the earth swam before my eyes; and I prayed, as I had never prayed in all my life before, though not a word passed my lips.

I was half blind and choked with dust, and in a dream I heard a voice—so hoarse and strained that I could not have recognized it for my own—urging me on to ever greater speed.

I seemed to be rushing through the air, objects fell away from me before I could realize them. Fortunately it was a quiet country road, or there must have been an

abrupt termination to such a mad ride. I was conscious of but one thought—one feeling—that my revolver was ready to my hand in my middle pocket and that Terah Schlich was waiting in that little house in the wood to touch the deadly button.

At last, after what seemed an eternity—though it was really an incredibly short space of time—I reached The Elms, new past it, and raced on to the Grey House. All the time I had been listening for the roar of an explosion, but, though there was a loud singing in my ears, which half-deadened me, I knew the fatal moment had not yet arrived. There was still time. Quickening my mare down a little, I brought her round to the spot where I had entered the grounds of the Grey House the first night, then taking my revolver in my hand, I made my way to the building in the wood. I staggered as I went, half feeling my way, cutting my face against the branches of the trees, bruising my hands.

The moon deadened the sound of my footsteps, but I had no fear; the fatal moment found me ready for anything.

The door of the hut was ajar, and I pushed it open. Terah Schlich was standing before a curious looking instrument, one hand half stretched out to touch it, the other holding a watch. As he raised his eyes I covered him with my revolver. His hand went out to the instrument, and I fired. He sprang towards me, reeled half way, and fell like a log to the ground. For a moment I listened with suspended breath, wondering whether I had been in time; but not a sound smote the hot, still air. Then, with a murmured, "Thank God!" I staggered outside, and sank half-unconscious on the grass.

When Major Clair found me, half an hour later, leaning against the shed, for I was beyond feeling any fear of what was inside. He looked white and ghastly, and his voice shook as he told me what had happened at The Elms. Professor Bordinman had contrived to shut up his party of guests—who were all men of influence and position—in the powder magazine, where they would inevitably have been blown to pieces had I been a few minutes later.

When Major Clair went inside the hut he made a curious discovery. The man I had shot down was not Schlich at all, but made up to resemble him perfectly, according to his last photograph. This was done, no doubt, with the object of distracting attention from the real Terah Schlich, who was none other than the so-called Professor Bordinman!

Sir Edwards was pleased to commend me highly (I felt that half the credit was due to Black Bess), but something was lacking to my satisfaction, for Schlich made good his escape in the balloon. His accomplice of the Grey House, however, when he had recovered from his wound, spent a considerable time in retirement at his country's expense.

Copyright in the United States of America by D. T. Pierce.



"He made a movement toward the instrument and I fired."



CHILDREN OF ODD FELLOWS' ORPHANS' HOME, LINCOLN, ILL.

WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

This photograph shows nine of the children of the Odd Fellows' Orphans' Home, located at Lincoln, Ill. Also, the picture of Mrs. Lizzie L. Morrison, superintendent and matron.

There are more than 150 children under her care, all of whom are Odd Fellows.

Since the opening of the institution in January, 1893, 221 children have been received. Some of these, through the lodges that had care of them, have secured good positions and are now making their own way. Some remained in the home until they reached the age of 14 years, when they graduated at the home school. They are now earning their own living. The following prominent

Odd Fellows compose the Board of Directors: United States District Judge J. Otis Humphrey of Springfield; M. P. Berry, Carthage; Colonel Geo. C. Rankin, Monmouth; John R. Davis, Jacksonville; Robert G. Stipp, Chicago. The following ladies comprise the Advisory Board: Mesdames Sophia Niemeyer, Chicago; May D. Stone, Van-dalia; Helen M. Baldwin, Mattoon; Edna A.

MRS. L. L. MORRISON.

Glazier, Chicago, and Mary P. Miller, Springfield. The home is maintained by the Odd Fellows of Illinois, and the property is now worth more than \$50,000. The children sing this little prayer before each meal: God is great and God is good. And we thank Him for this food. By His hand must all be fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread."